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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 003992

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SUBJECT: TURKEY'S LOCAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN IN ANKARA: LET
THE GAMES BEGIN

REF: ANKARA 3784

(U) Classified by Acting Political Counselor Nicholas S.
Kass. Reason: 1.5 (b)(d).

1. (C) Summary: In the metropolitan municipality of Ankara, the campaign season has begun anew. Local elections must be held here by April 2004, although some of our contacts continue to speculate that the ruling AK Party could change the constitution to hold local polls sometime this fall. Candidates are already jockeying to become AK's candidate for "Lord High Mayor" in what some polls suggest could be a slugfest between AK and the opposition Establishmentarian CHP, which is traditionally strong in Kemalist Ankara. Although AK has not made its preference known, barring the entrance of a "big name" from among the party administration or those close to Erdogan, the battle in AK is likely to come down to two names: Turgut Altinok, mayor of conservative Kecioren township, and current Ankara mayor Melih Gokcek. End summary.

The Challenger

2. (C) Lying just north of downtown Ankara, Kecioren is a conservative community with a diverse migrant population from all over Anatolia. As mayor of Kecioren for the last nine years, Altinok, who was formerly a member of the ultra-nationalist MHP and later joined AK predecessor Fazilet, is known for having greatly improved his city's infrastructure and for eliminating most of the shanty towns ("gecekondular"). In a meeting with us June 19, he noted that "when I first arrived, Kecioren was 5/6 gecekondu; now it is only 1/6." Altinok claimed that many affluent Turks, who formerly only sought out the more cosmopolitan Cankaya district, are now moving in droves to Kecioren. "It helps that P.M./AK Chairman Erdogan makes his home here," he said.

3. (C) Altinok offered that there is little left for him to do as Kecioren mayor and that he is ready for the greater challenge of managing Ankara municipality. When asked, Altinok stated without hesitation that he will be AK's candidate. He asserted that he has a personal relationship with Erdogan, which, Altinok said, has grown because he joined AK early on: "I was the first AK mayor in Turkey," he boasted. AK, he said, recognizes the importance of Kecioren for the Anatolian vote; it had planned to hold its first party meeting there, but was dissuaded when facilities proved too small (a problem Altinok is trying to remedy with planned construction projects).

4. (C) Altinok asserted baldly that his competition, Gokcek, is a "shameless self-promoter" whose access to media gives him an unfair advantage. Gokcek is also corrupt, Altinok alleged, without going into details.

The Favorite?

5. (C) Mayor Gokcek, an independent formerly with center-right ANAP and later of the Islamist Refah/Fazilet, is a polarizing figure. Supporters and critics alike note his successes in cleaning up the city by building parks and green spaces, reducing air pollution, and razing gecekondu. On the other hand, in a typically Machine-style and often petty fashion (Gokcek has visited Chicago to "exchange views with Mayor Daley), he routinely punishes districts that didn't vote his way by removing or restricting some municipal services. Gokcek advisors assert that despite such liabilities, the mayor maintains a high level of popular appeal (40% approval).

16. (C) In a June 19 meeting with poloff, Gokcek chief advisor Murat Dogru explained that the mayor wants to be on AK's ticket and that negotiations are still underway. Dogru claimed that there is resistance to Gokcek's membership in AK from F.M. Gul and those close to him -- including AK M.P. and Embassy contact Murat Mercan, who once worked for Gokcek. They view the incumbent as a potential national rival. Dogru expressed confidence that AK will eventually agree to make Gokcek its candidate. "It's the only thing that makes sense," he said. (Note: as reported reftel, Erdogan and Gokcek are seeking rapprochement. End note). According to an independent pollster/activist with excellent access to conservative circles, Gokcek, a skilled political operator, is assiduously lobbying AK party officials, including members of the Parliamentary group, to support his AK candidacy and legitimize his place as a national contender.

17. (C) Dogru dismissed other potential candidates, including Altinok. According to public opinion data that Dogru says he has gathered over the last several months, Altinok's support is hovering at 7 percent. Moreover, Dogru launched his own corruption counter-allegations against the Kecioren mayor, smugly offering to poloff that Altinok is stealing water from Ankara municipality. "We have the photographs and documents to prove it," he said. When the time is right, Gokcek will be ready to attack Altinok in the press.

Comment

18. (C) Altinok's assertion that he has a lock on the AK nomination probably reflects some wishful thinking. Indeed, if AK does not tap Gokcek -- who wants to use AK to capitalize on the party's public support and as a vehicle for his own national aspirations -- there is a real risk that the conservative vote in Ankara will split. This would pave the way for a candidate on the left. A recent SONAR poll showed CHP and AK in a virtual dead heat in the capital, which suggests that with the right candidate -- always a key consideration in local election prognostications -- the otherwise moribund CHP could make a run for it. Meanwhile, there is also the Genc party of Motorola deadbeat Cem Uzan's Genc Party, which could be the dark horse in Ankara. According to some polls, Genc is already lurking as the second most popular party nationwide. Genc appears intent on adding disillusioned Establishment voters to its base among more impoverished and benighted nationalist elements.
PEARSON